



ДЕРЕВЯННЫЕ МАЧТОВЫЕ ЦЕРКВИ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОЙ НОРВЕГИИ



Евгений Ходаковский

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EVGENY KHODAKOVSKY

## THE STAVE CHURCHES OF MEDIAEVAL NORWAY

The monograph presents a detailed panorama of the 12th–15th-century wooden religious architectural monuments located in southern and central Norway. These unique churches have a timber-frame (“stave”) construction and make up a complex of some of the most ancient surviving wooden buildings in the world. Despite this, while of indisputable artistic merit and historical significance the stave churches of mediaeval Norway remain insufficiently studied by Russian scholars. In that respect the monograph is a first attempt to summarize the history and specific character of Norwegian wooden church buildings. It proposes a variant method of classifying the structures and is accompanied by a detailed bibliography. The stave churches of Norway are analyzed in the broad context of wooden construction in the 7th–11th centuries in the British Isles, Denmark and Sweden, revealing them as a striking and original manifestation of the Norwegian architectural genius against the background of the general picture of mediaeval construction. It is only natural that in Norway, situated on the periphery of Europe, art acquired from the outset a distinctive local “endemic” character. The same factors also determined the unique character of the evolution of Norwegian construction, which was to a large extent founded upon the country’s domestic

creative resources and retained its originality for centuries.

Despite the active measures taken to preserve wooden churches in Norway, today there are less than two and a half dozen of these edifices left, which is a mere 3% of the total number of Norwegian churches in the Middle Ages. The task for present-day researchers lies in devoting as much attention as possible to the surviving buildings and through analysis of them to reconstruct a more or less complete panorama of mediaeval architecture, in which the dominance of masonry constructions that we see now was not at all so clear-cut. Norway’s wooden architecture goes some way to compensate for these lacunae and adds substantially to the history of European architecture in the 12th–14th centuries — its technologies, principles and typological variety.

The important role played by Norway in the sphere of wooden construction, the country’s distinctive culture and specific course of historical development determined the geographical boundaries of wooden architecture in Scandinavia, which is represented primarily by buildings in southern and central regions of Norway — Sogn, Numedal, Valdres and Møre. The heyday of this phenomenon lasted from the middle of the 12th century through the 13th, while construction ceased after the epidemic of the Black Death in 1348–1352,





BORG, Lofoten Islands. "Long house". 8th century. Reconstruction

although the inertia of the mediaeval Norwegian architectural tradition can be sensed in some 14th – and 15th-century buildings belonging to the "Møre" group.

The history of the study of Norwegian wooden architecture begins in the Romantic period, when, as a consequence of the rise of national self-consciousness at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, an interest in mediaeval culture arose across Europe. The emerging concern for native wooden architecture among leading members of Norway's intellectual elite was also due to the danger those distinctive edifices being lost. The real zealous pioneers in the discovery

of this aspect of Norwegian architecture were Johann Christian Dahl, Nicolay Nicolaysen, Peter Andreas Blix and Lorentz Dietrichson. In the 20th century the main publications only came out after the Second World War, when the study of works of mediaeval Scandinavian architecture shifted from the ideological plane to the analysis of concrete factual material. A leading role in researching Norwegian wooden architecture in the second half of the 20th century was played by Håkon Christie, Andres Bugge, Peter Anker, Roar Hauglid and Claus Ahrens, followed more recently by Jørgen H. Jensenius, Ola Storsletten and Leif Anker.



The flourishing of wooden church construction in mediaeval Norway was stimulated not only by external architectural impulses. The internal creative potential of the culture in the time of the Vikings, who attained very high levels of mastery in woodworking in the construction of dwellings and ships, is of equal importance here. Early Scandinavian residential construction (mainly the "long houses", such as the Chieftain House at Borg, Lofoten) can undoubtedly be regarded as the foundation for the subsequent development of architecture in the Christian era. The ship, too, was home to a Scandinavian throughout the summer season

and continued to perform this function after his death, becoming a posthumous dwelling-place for his remains. It is therefore entirely acceptable to speak of shipbuilding in connection with Norwegian wooden architecture. "Architecture as a ship" and "the ship as architecture" — this distinctive way of looking at things is a key to understanding many aspects of the Scandinavian worldview, first in the pagan era and then in the Christian one.

The flowering of wooden architecture in Norway in the 12th and 13th centuries is inseparable from the history of the emergence and development in the 7th–11th centuries of wooden

GREENSTED. Essex, United Kingdom. St. Andrew's church. 11th century





*Urnes stave church. After 1130*





*Kaupager stave church. Circa 1137*

architecture in Northern Europe, from where Christianity came to Norway in the middle and second half of the 10th century. Most significant in this respect is the architectural context of Britain (Greensted), Sweden (Lund, Gotland), Denmark and Germany, as well as Norway itself in the 11th and early 12th centuries.

Norwegian stave churches of the 12th–13th centuries take the form of a complicated timber frame construction filled in with vertical panels. This technological aspect is exceptionally important for determining the place of Norwegian architecture in the general context of wooden Christian construction, since in the building traditions of Rus' and Eastern

Europe (Poland, Slovakia, the Czech lands and Carpathian Ruthenia) from ancient times the basic spatial units were frames made of interlocked horizontal rows of logs. An examination of the technologies employed in the Norwegian churches makes it possible to draw conclusions about the skilful combination of the properties and possibilities of timber as a readily available and long familiar building material with successful attempts to develop Norwegian construction within the mainstream of European masonry architecture. This should not be seen as belittling local Norwegian originality, but in composition, the treatment of space and form Scandinavian churches in many ways



resembled early mediaeval or Romanesque basilicas, relaying into wood canonized architectural images and associations.

The problem of describing the typological diversity of Norwegian stave churches and their elementary classification remains one of the most difficult in the study of the subject. In this situation any system proposed will be a compromise to one degree or another as it is obvious that the great variety of Norway's wooden church architecture over the course of the centuries cannot be reduced to just a few types. In the light of this, connecting works of Norwegian wooden church architecture by geographical location into regional groups

implies, first of all, the identification of a leading edifice that possesses a particular set of typological characteristics. Secondly, it becomes expedient to identify local centres with their own developmental specifics and chronological boundaries that have had a certain influence on the formation of the typology of buildings. This kind of "regional" grouping principle is perfectly suitable for works of church architecture as the emergence of local architectural centres, "schools", tendencies and traditions is determined by a whole string of factors, among which geography is certainly dominant.

The Sogn group is made up of three-aisled basilica churches from the 12th century (Urnes,

*Kaupager stave church. Circa 1137. Interior*

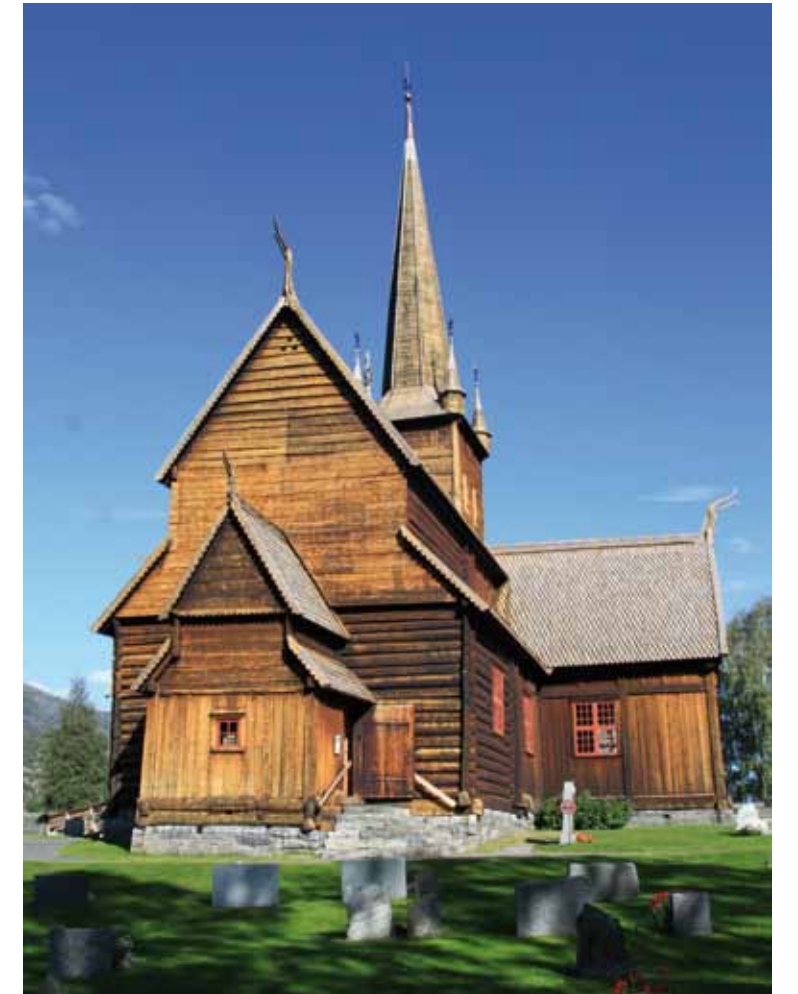




Kaupanger, Hopperstad, Fortun, Årdal, Hafslo, Lom, Torpo) located in the Sogn region and in adjoining valleys in mainland Norway. They are examined together not only as a regional group, but also for a number of similar typological features — the three-aisled layout with a higher central volume, a considerable number of freestanding pillars separating the nave and side aisles and the regular rhythm of their placement along the full length of the nave. All these features give the edifices of the Sogn group a strongly pronounced horizontal vector of spatial development along the East-West axis, while the churches themselves are an original interpretation in wood of a type widespread and canonical in Western European architecture — the basilica church.

The Borgund group. The differences between the Sogn and Borgund groups lie mainly in the placement of the pillars in the nave: while in the former pairs of freestanding stave piers produce a steady rhythm of transverse divisions of the interior space, in members of the Borgund group (Borgund, Gol, Hegge, Tonjum, Stedje, Flesberg) that rhythm is interrupted due to the introduction of an additional portal in the south façade. In this case the pillars in the southern row step apart, as it were, in front of the doorway, which creates the need for a similar arrangement of the pillars on the north side of the nave. Thus, in churches of the Borgund type the supports of the nave are grouped in the corners, freeing up the longitudinal and transverse axes. A regular rhythm of articulation is maintained only on the upper level — the triforium formed by cross-braces in the form of “St Andrew’s crosses” that rest on the cross beam where the series of pillars is interrupted.

The Valdres group. The small three-aisled churches at Høre and Lømen, places in the Valdres district of southern Norway, can also be ascribed to a separate typological category



Lom stave church. Mid. 12th century

that might be called the Valdres group. With certain provisos we can also include within it the church in Øye and the one from Vang. The distinctive feature of the Valdres group is a four-pillar central volume that comes close to a square in floor plan. To some extent the structure of the Valdres churches, where the number of freestanding pillars flanking the nave is reduced to a minimum, is a reduced version of the Borgund type. Indeed the Valdres group can in part be viewed as a “sub-type” of the Borgund tendency. This is borne out, firstly by the chronological proximity of the two categories, as they were built in practically the same period (late 1100s – early 1200s). Secondly, the geographical distributions of the two groups



*Heddal stave church. 13th century*

overlap. Thus the Valdres churches are another proof of the connection between typological features and regional location, and also additional evidence of the considerable potential for different constructional approaches inherent in the configuration of Norway's wooden basilica churches.

The churches of the Heddal group (Heddal, Ringebu and Ål) possess certain features that connect them with each other and, in part, with edifices of the Borgund type. Once again it is a question of the arrangement of the pillars

around the central volume: in at least three of these buildings the quantity of divisions in the nave itself does not coincide with the number of bays at the level of the triforium, where there are exactly twice as many.

This typology systemizes to some degree the extant three-aisled churches, but it is necessary to recognize the provisional nature of such a classification. These difficulties are associated not only with the study of specific objects, but also as a whole reflect a broad set of problems for the study of wooden architecture, when the



edifices that have by some miraculous chance survived permit only a fragmentary reconstruction of the overall typological picture of works of mediaeval architecture.

The Haltdalen group. In mediaeval Norway, where population levels were never high, small churches without side aisles were an ideal form of religious building on account of their compactness, inexpensiveness and functionality. Their two-part structure of sanctuary and nave, each covered by a pitched roof, was thus reduced to the minimum that the Christian building tradition expected of a place of worship. The most illustrative example is provided by the church from Haltdalen. Following it, the many single-naved edifices with the same composition can be provisionally allotted to

the Haltdalen group, irrespective of their time of construction or geographical location. The churches in the parishes of Vangsnes, Rød, Gransherad and Ålen had the same arrangement with the nave wider than the sanctuary, and those in Sauland and Veggli probably had a similar configuration. The enduring stability of this simple and at the same time highly functional composition is demonstrated by the retention and rethinking of this archetypical treatment of volumes and space in the masonry architecture of Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, which to all appearances reproduced the shape of some wooden predecessor church to which generations of parishioners had been accustomed (Talgje, Kviteseid, Giske, Trondenes).

*Haltdalen stave church. Circa 1170*





*Hedalen stave church. After 1163. Drawing by G. Bull. 1855*

Nevertheless, for all its apparent minimalist perfection, such a simple composition must at the same time inevitably be perceived as a starting point for further variations. Besides, due to their small size the 12th–13th-century churches constructed for relatively small congregations in the Norwegian provinces in the Middle Ages, were radically reconstructed and enlarged in the Modern Era due to a growing population, new aesthetic demands and the way Lutheran worship was conducted. The change involved the reconstruction and widening of the sanctuary, as was done with the churches in Undredal and Eidsborg. Those in Reinli and Rinde are rare examples of a single-naved church where the nave and sanctuary were of equal width from the outset. Later, in the 1600s and 1700s when many of Norway's mediaeval churches were reconstructed to accommodate growing numbers of worshippers, a transept was added to a number of them. This tendency affected above all small single-naved buildings. As a result the churches in Hedalen, Rollag and Garmo were enlarged considerably and acquired a cruciform ground plan.

The Numedal group is represented by buildings in Nore, Uvdal and Høyjord. Until the mid-1800s the list of edifices of this type also included the churches in Nes and Flå. The common feature of the Numedal churches is the presence of a freestanding support post in the centre of the nave, which gives a completely different vector to the development of the entire composition. Such a single-piered composition may have had its origins in the general constructional approaches of masonry architecture in Northern Europe. The mediaeval architecture of the Baltic basin presents examples of masonry churches with a single central pier — at Ikšķile (Latvia), Anga, Gammelgarn and a number of other buildings on the island of Gotland. While in the spatial treatment of the basilica type and simple single-naved

churches the horizontal element is dominant, in the Numedal group there is an obvious tendency towards a centrally planned character.

The Møre group gets its name from the district of that name situated between Sognefjord and Trondheim, where the main edifices of this type are located (Rødven, Kvernes and Grip). The common geographical region, relatively late date and distinctive local features make it possible to view these buildings as belonging to a more or less coherent tradition made up of original works of Norwegian maritime architecture from the late Middle Ages that represent an alternative line of development.

The first characteristic typological feature of the Møre group is the intermediary (and not just corner) staves in the walls of the main body, which make it possible to considerably increase the length of the church. The second feature of the group arises from the fact that a significantly longer nave is a direct cause of problems with stability. Accordingly, for greater rigidity all the churches of this group have rectangular ceiling beams running across the nave. The third, and most peculiar, feature of churches of the Møre type is the use, at Rødven and Kvernes, of something not seen elsewhere in Norway — sloping logs supporting the structure externally in the manner of buttresses. Even if these elements are of later origin, they may reproduce an archaic means of reinforcing a building that probably goes back to early mediaeval churches. Thus we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that this type came into Norwegian architecture together with the arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia under Haakon the Good and Olaf Trygvason, when the very first churches on Norwegian soil were built in the Møre region.

Examining the churches of the Møre group as the culminating stage in the history of mediaeval Norwegian wooden architecture, we discover a rather different manner or architectural



Nore stave church. 1160s





*Kvernes stave church. 14th; 17th century*







“dialect” that sets these buildings apart from those in the Sogn, Valdres or Numedal regions. What remains in common is the principle of using vertical staves to form a framework. However, the presence of intermediary pillars, transverse ceiling beams and external props coupled with the absence of “St Andrew’s crosses” and quadrant brackets means this is an alternative form of frame construction and, consequently, functions according to somewhat different principles. There may be various reasons for this. If Møre was the region from which the new faith began to spread across the rest of Norway, it is not impossible that practices endured there for a very long time that were characteristic of the period of the Christianization of Scandinavia and Iceland, which was converted around the year 1000. Thus, these edifices, dating for the most part from the 1300s and 1400s, quite unexpectedly raise questions about the initial period in the history of Norwegian church-building, about its possible British origins, about connections with Iceland and, more generally, about the nature of archaisms that survive in a particular region for a period of centuries.

The intensive church building that went on in Norway in the 12th and 13th centuries was interrupted in the mid-1300s by the plague that assailed Europe and has gone down in history as the Black Death. The epidemic raged between 1348 and 1352. Scandinavia suffered the last, but no less devastating, blow of the pestilence that radically changed the course of the socio-economic and spiritual evolution of Northern Europe. The already sparsely inhabited region was left almost depopulated; farms and trades went into decline; parishes were deserted; old buildings left unattended rapidly became dilapidated and ruined. Neither could Norway’s situation on the international stage in the late Middle Ages be described as favourable to the development of art and culture. In 1397 the country became part of the Union of

Calmar and for long centuries it was subject to the Danish or Swedish crown. Norway, which back in the 13th century under Haakon the Old had been one of the most powerful monarchies whose sway extended to Iceland and the Barents Sea, started to turn quickly into a backward province on the periphery not only of Europe, but even of the Scandinavian realms.

Finally, a very important event at the cusp of the Modern Era was the Reformation, which began in Norway in 1537. Many churches that embodied the period of dependence on Rome were torn down as symbols of Catholicism. The remaining buildings were reconstructed with a complete change of interior fittings — lectoria were dismantled; rows of pews and pulpits for the sermons of Protestant pastors were installed, while the window openings were enlarged. Details and sections of mediaeval stave churches were re-used in the construction of new churches, at Vågå (1625–1627) and Fåvang (1627–1630), for example. Yet during those difficult centuries, Scandinavian wooden architecture, seemingly in decline, nevertheless gradually adapted to the new conditions. One of the most significant developments in the late Middle Ages was the appearance of churches made of cells of horizontal logs alongside the earlier stave constructions, as is evidenced by the earliest place of worship built in this technique — the “Fisherman’s Chapel” of 1459 now in the Maihaugen museum at Lillehammer. Subsequently, in the 17th and 18th centuries, when mediaeval churches were being reconstructed, as a rule in order to enlarge them and add new volumes, it was log cell extensions that were used for this purpose (Lom, Rollag, Nore, Eidsborg and Kvernes).

Of the roughly 900–1000 churches that existed before the mid-14th-century Black Death less than 30 have survived down to the present. However, despite these colossal losses, Norway’s longstanding devotion to the traditions

of wooden architecture has turned the country into a unique preserve, where the surviving wooden edifices seem to embody the succession of different eras. In this lies the world-ranking significance of Norwegian wooden architecture that, despite powerful processes of urbanization and radical changes in lifestyle under the influence of global civilizational shifts, graphically presents an integral and sequential picture of the development of architecture in wood from the Middle Ages to the present day.

In conclusion I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Siri Skjold Lexau, Dr. Art., of the University of Bergen, Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetical Studies who since 2006 has provided

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I should also like to thank the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments (Fortidsminneforeningen) for the noble mission that it has been performing since 1844, for its openness and assistance in the study of those mediaeval stave churches that are in its care and for permission to record them photographically.

*Grip stave church. 15th–20th centuries*

